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A Non-Materialistic View of A Person

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I have argued that persons are individual human beings capable of mental activities. In this sense, persons have not only physical properties, but also various forms of consciousness. I have mentioned that the relation between a person and his/her physical properties is contingent; not logical, but factual. I have also mentioned Descartes' view that a person is a combination of two separate entities—a body and a mind. Only the mind is conscious; the physical properties that the person possesses are properties of his/her body. It is conceivable that either should exist without the other. That is to say that the mind can exist without the aid of the body. I have provided a detailed summary of Strawson's theory because it goes against Williams's concept of person and gives an account of 'person', which in turn, removes many of the difficulties of the mind-body relation. Strawson concludes that a person is not identical with his/her body. Like Descartes, he gives primacy to the mental attributes of a person. Thus, the concept of a person is fundamental and metaphysical. This is the main theme of this article.

The concept of person is one of the most important concepts in the philosophy of mind. The present thesis' aim is to outline and explain the non-materialist theory of the mind and person. The fundamental question here is: what is a person? And what is its nature? It was Descartes who proposed a theory of mind and person according to which a person is not just a material body, but also a thinking self in total exclusion of the material body. According to Descartes, a person is a self, a self-conscious mind which thinks, feels, desires and so on. The materialists have, however, rejected the Cartesian theory of persons, and have argued that persons are just material bodies, though they are complex material systems with some sort of mental properties.

However, it is erroneous to say that mind is the brain or mind has only physical properties. Our brain has a particular size, shape and spatial location. In virtue of these qualities, our brain has a

particular look. Our brain can be variously experienced. The qualities of such experiences are related in some way to the material object. But if this is so, where do we situate the qualities of experience? A neuroscientist says that all these are neural activities. Now the question is: where are they? The answer is that they are located in our mind. This implies that the mind is distinct from the body. The problem of this essay is the question: are persons material bodies? Materialists have argued that persons are material bodies, albeit very complex material bodies. My aim is to refute person as a material entity and establish that person is a non-material entity.

I. WHAT IS A PERSON?

In this article, my intention is to argue for a non-materialistic view of person. That is to say, I intend to examine the nature of person from a non-materialist point of view. Before analysing this concept of person, we have to raise a few questions like what is a person, what is the nature of person, and so on. These questions are fundamental in the philosophy of mind. In fact, the English word 'person' is alleged to have been derived from the Latin 'persona', which was the mask worn by actors in dramatic performances. Neither in common usage nor in philosophy has there been a univocal concept of 'person'. In common usage, 'person' refers to any human being in a general way. The person is distinct from a thing or material object. It generally stands for a living conscious human being.

Moreover, Strawson's definition of person is different from that of Williams. Strawson defines 'person' as 'a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation, etc., are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type.'² Thus, for Strawson, persons are unique individuals who have both mental and physical attributes. Thus, persons are neither purely physical body, nor are they pure spiritual substances. However, while Strawsonian view of persons is purely non-material, whereas Williams' view of person is purely material, which opposes Strawson's view. This is because Williams' claim is that bodily continuity is a necessary condition for personal identity, because according to Williams, it is the body which identifies the persons, but not the

mind, and there is no mind at all; therefore, bodily criterion identify the persons.

Thus, it is clear that Strawson would certainly reject the contention that mental attributes are reducible to physical attributes because he admits that the concept of persons is non-material. But here the question arises: does Strawson wish to say that persons are bodies of a certain sort, namely, bodies which have mental attributes only?

Strawson holds that persons have bodily attributes too. But unlike ordinary bodies, persons are things, which have mental attributes as well. According to Strawson,³ it is essential to persons that they be entities which necessarily have both mental and bodily attributes. In addition, are those mental things essentially different from physical things? They are different types of substance. Persons are radically different material bodies. Strawson's theory looks dualistic in holding that there are two different types of subjects, the physical bodies and persons.

Again, physical bodies necessarily have only one dimension, i.e. physical dimension. Persons necessarily have two dimensions, physical and mental. Persons, thus, have a dual nature. Now we have to look at the relation between the knowledge a person has of himself and the knowledge that others have of him. Moreover, if the unity of a person is necessarily connected with the continuance of his body through time, then it is impossible for a person to survive the death of his body. Secondly, if bodily identity is a necessary criterion of personal identity, then it could not be shown that some non-physical characteristics of a person continue after his bodily death. On the other hand, if bodily identity is not a necessary criterion of personal identity, perhaps bodily death is merely one major event in a person's history and not the end of his life. Finally, if the fundamental criterion of identity were memory, it would follow that a person might be known to have survived death because he continued to have memories in his disembodied state.

The most important fact about the person is the self. The self is sometimes used to mean the whole series of a person's inner mental states and sometimes the spiritual substance to which they belong. The self does not refer to the body but to the mental history of the person. This made the unity problem seem intractable, when the

mental images, feeling and the like are contrasted with the temporal persistence. In Strawson's theory, a person is a thing which necessarily has both mental and physical aspects. The person is primarily the subject of mental experience. Considering the Strawsonian theory of person, we cannot say that a person is a body, but we can say that a person is, in part, a body. If a person is a body, then it cannot be a conscious mind. One of the important questions is: can we even say that a person has a body? Shaffer supposes that Strawson would want to be able to say so. But what would it mean about the theory of the person? It means that persons have bodily attributes. Another question is: does it say anything about the relation between a person and a body? The body necessarily has bodily attributes and has nothing to do with a person's attributes. But Strawson's view is that persons have both bodily and mental attributes.

We recognize all human beings as persons. This is because we generally do not make distinction between persons and human beings. But we can hardly contemplate the existence of biologically very different persons inhabiting other planets; who are not human beings like us. However, the concept of person is in some way an ineliminable part of our conceptual scheme. In our conceptual scheme, person and human beings coincide.

Joseph Margolis⁴ in his book *Persons and Minds* mentioned that persons are the particulars that have minds and nervous systems, sensation and brain processes. But this is not quite enough. A nervous system is not a person, nor is a psyche one. It is at once the subject of both neurological and psychological predicates. In other words, it is both a nervous system and a psychic entity. Persons are not meriologically complex entities nor any kind,⁵ each of which contains parts, a non-physical basic subject and a purely corporeal object to which this subject is in some way attached. Such a claim would not allow us to ascribe psychological attributes or corporeal attributes to the person as a whole. It is because persons are more than their bodies and that they are not reducible to any kind of body, gross or subtle. The person-substance, as described above, is not taken to exclude the material properties as such. They only exclude the fact that persons are material bodies and nothing else. Persons are autonomous in so far as their description in terms of

bodies and mind is concerned. But it is not as if no reference to body and mind is to be retained at all. Thus, person's description have the attributive reference to body and mind.

From the above discussion, we can reiterate the Cartesian distinction between the mind and the body. They are opposed to each other because the essence of mind is thinking and the essence of body is extension. That is to say, the body is something spatial which is perishable. Moreover, the mind or person is something non-spatial. After death, only the body remains. This concept of the body becomes gruesomely explicit when we refer to it as 'the remains'.⁶ However, it is this conception of the body which comes closest to that found in the person theory. In this theory, we find that the body is not a person, nor is it a part of a person. It is the person, insofar as he is thought of as the subject of bodily attributes. But it becomes a reality at death. We call it a corpse.

Therefore, one of the paradoxical implications of the person theory is that the body which a person has, cannot be conceived of as a physical object subject to the law of physical world. As we know from this theory, persons are conscious. Finally, from the above examination, we came to know that a person's body is not a physical thing.

II. PERSON, MIND AND CONSCIOUSNESS

As we have argued so far, a person is an entity that has both mental and physical attributes. Hence, we could say of a person that he is five feet tall, weigh one hundred kilograms, etc., But more importantly, we could say that he is thinking about his friends, feels a pang of happiness or is sad, or so on. We may, therefore, say that person has a mind, which is different from his body, because the subject of consciousness does not mean a body of a certain sort. But it still might turn out that whatever is a subject of consciousness is identical with a body of a certain sort.

However, Strawson rejects the view that the subject of a state of consciousness is wholly immaterial, non-physical, a thing to which nothing but states of consciousness can be ascribed. According to him, consciousness is not applicable to physical things, nor to purely immaterial substance which is applicable to person. But a fundamental question is: what is consciousness? Generally, consciousness

is described as something which distinguishes man from a good deal of the world around. Only a person possesses this consciousness, which is not by other material objects. Another question arises, what is this consciousness which a person certainly has, but rocks and other animate beings do not? As G.E. Moore writes, 'The moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what distinctly it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us as mere emptiness when we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue; the other element is as if it were diaphanous.'⁷ Of course, we know perfectly well that we are conscious of things around us, including other people, but we do not grasp consciousness itself.

However, it is this common feature, consciousness, which may be said to be the central element in the concept of mind. Shaffer points out that if we were asked to give a general characterization of the branch of philosophy called philosophy of the mind, we might say that it is that branch particularly concerned with the nature of consciousness. We will call them 'mental phenomena', to which only beings capable of consciousness are subject. Mental phenomena include ways of being conscious, i.e. hearing, imaging, etc.⁸ A person as being minded,⁹ has the capacity of doing the mental activities. Such activities include thinking, willing, feeling, understanding, speaking, communicating, and above all, remembering the past. Mental activities are such that they presuppose the fact that there is a thinker who is capable of these activities. The thinker is here a subject or 'I' who is or has the capacity of consciousness. Wherever we will find the concept of 'I', we will also find the existence of consciousness because it is a person who stands for the concept of 'I', have consciousness.

One of the most general views is that the philosophy of the mind is concerned with all mental phenomena which they themselves are concerned with consciousness. Philosophers from Descartes onwards have accepted consciousness as a fundamental metaphysical reality. I remain the same person if I am conscious of being so, even though my body should change drastically and become diminished through amputation. Logically, it is possible that I should remain the same person although I am altogether disembodied. Persons are indivisible, non-corporeal simple entities. It is because

it becomes difficult here to distinguish persons so construed from metaphysical selves, transcendental egos, spirits, mental substances, souls, and other similar immaterial substances. However, the concept of person does not fit into these entities because persons are, if anything, concrete beings in the world. One can ascribe consciousness to others only if one can identify other subjects of experience. In addition, one cannot identify other subjects if one can identify them only as subjects of experience, possessors of state of consciousness.¹⁰ The latter must have concrete existence in the world.

If we are too obsessed with the 'inner' criteria, we shall be tempted to treat persons essentially as minds. However, admitting outer criteria does not mean that there are no states of consciousness. We should claim that some P-predicates refer to the occurrence of state of consciousness. The persons are uncertainly identifiable beings having a life of their own. They are not definitely Cartesian egos; rather they possess a mixed bag of M-predicates and P-predicates. Persons are in any case conscious individuals who can be ascribed a large number of P-predicates such as thinking, feeling, willing, deciding, etc. These conscious states, according to Searle,¹¹ are intentional, i.e. are of some thing. In other words, they are directed at something outside them. Thus, persons who have these conscious states are intentional and mental beings.

Again, only a being that could have conscious intentional states could have intentionality at all, and so every unconscious intentional state is at least potentially conscious. This thesis has enormous consequence for the study of the mind. But there is a conceptual connection between consciousness and intentionality that has the consequence that a complete theory of intentionality requires an account of consciousness. And our consciousness is consciousness of something. Thus, persons have the essential feature of consciousness. There is an interconnection between person, mind, and consciousness. Empirically, there is distinction among them. But transcendently, they point in the same direction. It is right to say that a person is a mental being, and the essence of mind is consciousness. Therefore, the concept of the mind, the person, and the consciousness go together. Thus, consciousness is related to the mind, which also belongs to a person.

III. THE DUAL NATURE OF PERSON

The problem of a person has traditionally been raised in a dualist context. It has greatly influenced those who have discussed the picture of a person as composed of two entities—body and mind—which are contingently related to each other. However, the person-substances are not merely a set of properties, physical or mental, because they are not fully exhausted in their descriptions.¹² The descriptions of the persons as having such and such properties are complete, still presuppose the fact that there are persons as having those properties. According to Strawson,¹³ the properties like 'being at such and such time and place', having such and such weight and colour, and so on are M-predicates. The other properties are psychological properties such as 'being in the state of happiness', or 'being in the state of pain', and so on are states of P-predicates. In this way, Strawson has rightly said, 'the concept of a person is to be understood as the concept of type of entity so that both predicates ascribe corporeal characteristics; a physical situation and consciousness are equally applicable to an individual entities of that type'.¹⁴ What is significant about them, as Strawson has pointed out, is their co-applicability to the same person substance. The M-predicates cannot be ascribable independently because that prohibits them from being ascribable to the conscious beings; like M-predicates, the P-predicates cannot be ascribed to the material bodies. This is because of a combination of a distinct kind of substance that has both physical and mental properties without being reducible to each other.

The above argument shows that Strawson, accepts person as non-material and non-dual without rejecting Cartesian dualism. This is because Descartes held, that when we are on the concept of a person, we are really referring to one or both of two distinct substances of different types, each of which has its own appropriate types of states and properties, each of which also has its own appropriate types of states and properties, and none of the states belongs to both. That is to say, that states of consciousness belong to one of these substances or to the other. Descartes has given a sharp focus to this dualistic conception of person. It is not easy to get away from dualism because persons have both sorts of attributes such as men-

tal and physical. According to dualistic conception, a person is something altogether distinct from the body. That is, person is not identical with his body. Some dualists, however, believe that a person is a composite entity, one part of which is its body and another part of which is something-immaterial, the spirit or soul. Thus, dualism essentially adheres to the mind-body distinction and persons as mental beings as distinguished from material bodies.

According to Descartes, the self of a person is something altogether distinct from its body. So the self is altogether non-physical, lacking in all physical characteristics whatever. On this interpretation, we can say that the person is an immaterial substance—a spirit or soul, which stands in some special relation to a certain physical body which is its body. Descartes thinks that a person is some sort of a combination of an immaterial soul and a physical body, which stand to one another in a rather mysterious relation of substantial union. However, Cartesian dualism does not maintain that a person is immaterial stuff. On the contrary, it maintains that a person is a combination of the body and mind. In fact, our bodies and we are utterly unlike one another in respect of the sorts of properties that we possess. Our bodies have spatial extension, and a location in physical space, whereas we have no such qualities. On the other hand, we have thoughts and feelings, states of consciousness, whereas our bodies are known to have qualities other than these.

But the question arises: should a person not simply be identified with a certain physical body, as Williams has argued? Strawson¹⁵ answers the above question. He says, mental states, such as thoughts and feelings do not seem to be properly attributable to something like a body, but only to a person. One is inclined to urge that it is 'I' who thinks and feels, not my body, even if I need to have a body to be able to think and feel. However, if a person is composed of a body but not identical with it, then it seems that every part of the body must be a part of the person but not every part of the person can be part of the body. So, one of the plausible assumptions is that a person has parts, which are not parts of his body, and so it is not identical with the body. However, by saying this we are denying that a person is composed of body. All that is meant is that persons have both bodily and mental existence. Persons are not purely disembodied spirits.

A. J. Ayer¹⁶ says that the relation between consciousness and the subject to which is attributed is a contingent relation. According to him, a person is not a purely immaterial subject; rather it is an embodied person to which mental attributes are causally ascribable. He accepts a causal relation between the person and his body. Therefore, according to him, there is no contradiction in holding that a person's body would have been inhabited by another person. Strawson, however, rejects Ayer's view, which takes a person apart from the body. He rejects the idea of causal relation altogether. According to him, persons are more primitive than their mind and body. That is, persons are primary than whereas mind and body are secondary.¹⁷

IV. PERSONS AS INDIVIDUALS

P.F. Strawson has adopted the term 'person' for a philosophical use which comes rather closer to common usage than did Locke's usage of the form, while it raises philosophical problems of its own. Perhaps it is less disreputable to hold that the person is a primitive concept. This is because the Lockean view of the concept of person is a forensic concept, but the Strawsonian concept of person is a metaphysical concept like that of the self and, therefore, it is not merely a social or a forensic concept.¹⁸ Pradhan¹⁹ pointed out that it is metaphysical precisely because it shows how it can be used to describe the minded being as the unique substance which is not identical with the body, though it is necessarily linked with the body. That is to say, persons have material bodies and yet are not on the same levels as the physical bodies or organisms. Persons, therefore, are not physical things at all and this is because persons transcend their physical existence.

The transcendental qualities, however, show that persons are explainable from the first-person perspective. The first-person perspective are unique individual or an 'I' who experience, as Wittgenstein²⁰ points out, that even it is not 'name' which can substitute 'I'. Therefore, the first person is not the description of any human being, because it refers to third-person perspective, but it refers to the person himself or herself. This does not mean that person is distinct from this world, but the person is a part of this world. A Strawsonian person, to begin with, is to be understood as

distinct from a mere material body, which retains the contrast customarily observed between person and things.

According to Strawson, each of us distinguishes between himself and the states of himself on the one hand, and what is not himself or a state of himself on the other. Then the question is: what are the conditions of our making this distinction? In what way do we make it, and why do we make it in the way we do? Strawson²¹ argues that in our conceptual scheme, material bodies are basic particulars. This means that material bodies could be identified without reference to another individual in particular, whereas the identification and re-identification of particulars of other categories rest ultimately on the identification of material bodies.

Then Strawson inquires whether we could make intelligible to ourselves a conceptual scheme in which material bodies are not basic. This leads him to the construction of a model no-space world, in which all the sensory items are auditory, but in which it did seem possible to find a place for the idea of a re-identifiable particulars by exploiting certain auditory analogues of the idea of spatial distance. However, the requirement was for a scheme in which a distinction was made between oneself and what is not one's self.

Let us now think of some ways in which we ordinarily talk of ourselves, certain things which we do, and which are ordinarily ascribed to ourselves. We ascribe to ourselves actions and intentions, sensations, thoughts and feelings, perceptions and memories. However, we ascribe to ourselves the location and altitude. Of course, not only do we ascribe ourselves temporary conditions, states, situations, but also enduring characteristics, including physical characteristics like height, shape and weight. That is to say, among the things that we ascribe to ourselves are those that we also ascribe to material bodies. But there are certain things and attributes that we ascribe to ourselves, but cannot dream of ascribing to material bodies.

Let us take a visual experience. First, there is a group of empirical facts of which the most familiar is that if the eyes of that body are closed, the person sees nothing. To this group belong all the facts known to the ophthalmic surgeon. Secondly, there is the fact that what falls within a person's field of vision at any moment depends in part on the orientation of his eyes, i.e. the direction his head is turned in and on the orientation of his eyeballs in their

sockets. Thirdly, there is the fact that where he sees from or what his possible field of vision at any moment is, depends on his body.

Strawson divides these facts into three groups to emphasize the following—the fact that visual experiences, in all three ways, depend on facts about some body or bodies. It is a contingent fact that it is the same body. Each person's body occupies a special position in relation to that person's perceptual experience. For each person, there is one body that occupies a certain causal position in relation to that person's perceptual experience.

For Strawson, a person's body occupies an important position in the person's experience so that he can answer the following questions satisfactorily:

- (a) Why are one's states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all?
- (b) Why are they ascribed to the same thing as certain corporeal characteristics?²²

For the Cartesians this question does not arise; it is only a linguistic illusion that both kinds of predicate are properly ascribed to one and the same thing, and that there is a common owner or subject. Descartes says that when we speak of a person, we refer to two distinct substances. The state of consciousness belongs to one of these substances and not to the other. Strawson says that he escapes one of our questions, but it does not escape the other—why is one's state of consciousness ascribed at all, to anything?

In order to overcome the above problems, Strawson used the concept of the person as a 'primitive concept.'²³ Then, he said that the concept of a person is the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation *c.* are equally applicable to a single type.²⁴ Now we can get answers to the above two questions. Strawson said that answers to these two questions are connected in this manner, '... that a necessary condition of states of consciousness being ascribed at all is that they should be ascribed to the very same things as certain corporeal characteristics, a certain physical situation and *c.* That is to say, states of consciousness

could not be ascribed at all, where as they were ascribed to persons, in the sense I have claimed for this world.'²⁵ The above Strawsonian view says that a necessary condition of a state of consciousness being ascribed at all is that they should be ascribed to persons. The concept of a person is prior to that of an individual consciousness. A person is not an embodied ego, but an ego might be a disembodied person.

Again, Strawson points out that one can ascribe states of consciousness to oneself only if one can ascribe them to others. One can ascribe them to others only if one can identify other subjects of experience. In addition, one cannot identify others if one can identify them only as subjects of experience, of states of consciousness. He says, this way will lead to Cartesianism. We cannot but refer to the bodies of others. So states of consciousness could not be ascribed at all, unless they are ascribed to an individual person who has a body. So the pure individual person or consciousness, in the sense of the pure ego, is a concept that cannot exist. Strawson says it can exist only as a secondary, non-primitive concept, and can be analyzed in terms of the concept of person.

The pure individual consciousness cannot exist as a primary concept to be used in the explanation of the concept of a person, but it might have a logically secondary existence. From within our conceptual scheme, each of us can conceive of his or her individual survival of bodily death. One has to think of oneself as having thoughts and memories in a disembodied state. But this disembodied state is only a secondary concept, because one cannot but think of persons as embodied beings. According to Strawson, 'A person is not an embodied ego, but an ego might be a disembodied person, retaining the logical benefit of individuality from having been a person.'²⁶ As we have seen, there are two kinds of predicates properly applied to individuals of this type. The first kind of predicates consist of those that are also properly applied to material bodies to which we do not ascribe states of consciousness, which he calls M-predicates. The second type consists of those predicates such as 'thinking hard', 'belief in God', etc., which he calls P-predicates. Therefore, Strawson says that the concept of person is to be understood as the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and those ascribing

corporeal characteristics (M-predicates) are equally applicable to an individual entity.

Then, he said, '... the concept of a person is to be understood as the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation and c. are equally applicable to an individual entity of that type.'²⁷ Strawson is not taking the concept of person as a secondary concept in relation to two primary kinds, a particular consciousness and a particular body (human). Then Strawson says that '... though not all P-predicates are what we should call "predicates ascribing states of consciousness" (e.g. "going for a walk" is not), they may be said to have this in common, that they imply the possession of consciousness on the part of that to which they are ascribed.'²⁸

From the above standpoint, what Strawson want to say is that 'one ascribes P-predicates to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour; and that behavioural-criteria one goes on are not just signs of the presence of what is meant by the P-predicates, but are criteria one goes on are not just signs of the presence of what is meant by the P-predicates, but are criteria of a logically adequate kind for the ascription of the P-predicates.'²⁹ This claim shows that a person is immaterial because the states of consciousness is applicable to a person. This is because there are predicates which could be both self-ascribable and other-ascribable to the same individual. But there remain many cases in which one has an entirely adequate basis for ascribing a P-predicate to oneself, and yet, this basis is distinct from those on which one ascribes the predicates to another. In other words, these predicates have the same meaning and both ways of ascription is in one perfect individual. That is why P-predicates have certain characteristics such as 'I am in pain', 'I am depressed', and etc., and one should not ascribe to somebody from these observations because this leads to third-person perspective of the concept of person.

Moreover, the above explanation leads to an important question: 'How can one ascribe to oneself, not on the basis of observation, the very same thing that others may have, on the basis of observation, reason of a logically adequate kind for ascribing one, which might be phrased?'³⁰ Strawson says that the above question may be

observed in a wider one, which might be phrased. The questions are, 'how are P-predicates possible?' or 'how is the concept of a person possible?'³¹ Strawson says that these two questions replace those two earlier questions, that are: why are one's states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all? And why are they ascribed to the same thing as certain corporeal characteristics? The answer to these two questions are inherited in the primitiveness of the concept of person; this is because the unique character of P-predicates, because he or she, who is an individual possess the P-predicates. The attributes of P-predicates make a person as an individual. Persons are metaphysical beings claiming an ontological reality in the sense that they could not be what they are without a metaphysical essence.³²

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32. This paper was presented in the 76th Session of Indian Philosophical Congress in the section of 'Metaphysics and Epistemology' held at Department of Philosophy, Gurukul Kangri University, Haridwar, India in 2001. I am grateful to those who had commented on my paper.